

Dear Mr. Katches,

I am writing in response to the December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018 article published on the front page of Saturday edition of the Tampa Bay Times (TBT) written by Megan Reeves entitled, "*Students Fail Teachers Left, Parents Complained. Now John Hopkins Middle has a new principal*". The article is unfair, defamatory and constitutes libel per se. It has been widely circulated and has and will have a permanent and detrimental impact on my professional reputation and career. In light of this, I demand an immediate and full retraction or correction and an apology.

The article deliberately excludes my view point and contains factually inaccurate statements in many of its accounts. It is unfair and unthinkable that the TBT would print statements that have no basis in facts. One such statement in the article is, "Jackson declined multiple requests by the *Tampa Bay Times* for an interview." This is patently and categorically false, and as such, I am demanding an apology and full retraction or correction of this statement within ten days. The fact is, at no time did Ms. Reeves or any staff member of the TBT contact me either telephonically or through email to request my comments and views on these issues. I can assure you if the TBT did contact me; I would have gladly provided an interview on my perspective and am still available to do so if the TBT wishes to speak with me. To address my perspective on this story I am submitting the following statement which I trust the TBT will publish in a conspicuous place and type as the original article:

In April 2017 I was asked to take the position of principal at John Hopkins Middle School with an effective date of July 1<sup>st</sup>. I was told at that time that there were several issues going on in the school that included (1) reducing the staff to fit the current enrollment of approximately 600 students. This resulted in seven teacher positions being eliminated. (2) A district team met with the remaining teachers and former principal and exercised the option out process that resulted in 22 teachers leaving either voluntarily or involuntarily based on their value add model (VAM) scores. The total number of teachers allocated for the school was 41 and 22 were notified of their transfers between March and April 2017. The outgoing principal was allowed to hire replacements and filled all but six of the positions. (3) Teachers left due to this process and the fact that the school was anticipated to receive a grade lower than the "C" it received. (4) During the same time, the 2017-18 student enrollment projections were at 750, an increase of 150 students from the 2016-17 school year. This enrollment swell was sixth grade students who were being drawn from Melrose, Campbell Park and Fairmont Park Elementary Schools. The majority of the new students were low performing on FSA ( Achievement level 1 and 2) and those were entering the school to include transfers from other middle schools were the same in performance- low achieving. (5) The 2017-18 student body, with the additional 150 students, had a proficiency in the low 30% range.

The combination of 50% of the faculty being reassigned, gaining 150 low performing students, a new administrative team placed much of the learning community in a "learning curve." The entire science department with the exception of Ms. Packard, who commented in the article, was new. This was the second full turnover of the science department in two years. The Language Arts and Mathematics

departments also had several new teachers. The core classes needed to prepare students for the state test were filled with teachers new to teaching, new to the school and many were non-traditional teachers- meaning they did not graduate from a teacher's college.

The school 's initiatives include International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Program (MYP) application status, visual and performing arts, Center for Journalism and Media studies magnet program with over 50% of the students in attendance as zoned.

The article included comments from a former violence prevention specialist. The mere need for that position tells about the dynamics of the school. The position is funded by the Juvenile Welfare Board through Gulf Coast Jewish Family Services. He was reassigned to another school by his agency for ongoing conflicts with staff at John Hopkins.

One parent does not speak for 740. The parent complainant in the article accounts a situation with me that never occurred. I was in attendance at the meeting and eight teachers, three administrators and counseling staff were in the room. They can attest to the fact that the comments asserted in the article, "I don't have time for this" never happened by me or anyone else in the room. As such, I am requesting a full and fair correction, apology or retraction within ten days.

On the matter of disciplining teachers for writing referrals, I never discouraged teachers to write referrals nor does any informal or formal communication where I questioned any teacher's disciplinary referrals exist. I sent teachers a video explaining the referral process in August 2017 since we had many teachers new to education and JHMS. The video clearly encouraged them to write referrals and was viewed by most of the teachers.

There were parent complaints as they are at all schools. Each complaint was addressed when they were brought to me. Many parents stepped up and helped through PTSA, SAC and volunteering their time. They recognized that improving the school could only happen if they became a part of the solution. All of the PTSA, SAC and other community activities to include the performing arts events were sparsely attended by parents.

As the leader of the school I am ultimately responsible for the success or lack thereof, however this was a difficult assignment I accepted without hesitation. What I do not accept is the blame being narrowly and singularly placed on me with an avoidance of the aforementioned challenges that resulted in the school's grade decline. There are 300 classes in this school's schedule. I cannot be in all of them at once. Two teachers do not speak for 51, one parent does not speak for all 740 and almost 70% low performing students who matriculate from low performing elementary schools cannot be owned by me alone. This is a multifaceted issue at John Hopkins- School, home and community.

The promising end to this assignment is that I left the school fully staffed in all core classes. We gained ten teachers [60% new to teaching] totaling 51 teachers for the 2018-19 school year, we also increased another 60 students (low performing scores) and started the school year with 36.4% proficiency in Math and 36.6 in Reading on the Fall MAP (Measurement of Academic Progress) assessment with four weeks of instruction-in short the learning environment at the school had improved. One of the new teachers,

Mr. Rice, posted on Facebook that the school has improved over last year by “leaps and bounds” which speaks to the true teacher’s perception about the direction the school is going. I am not perfect however I did my best. I know Mr. Jones will assess the state of the school and ensure that the trajectory is upward. I wish him only the best.

On the matter of having a track record as a successful principal, I want to recapitulate my principal assignments.

I led Thurgood Marshall Fundamental Middle School from August 2006 to January 2012. During that time, the school enrollment grew from approximately 350 students with a capacity of 500 students to 950 with a waiting list of over 300 students. The school teetered between a “B” and “A” during those years. The City of St. Petersburg recognized my leadership twice for improving the school grade. New board member, Mr. Dudley, was a St. Petersburg city council member during that time and was present at the recognition ceremonies. All of my evaluations were effective to highly effective.

I served as principal at Martinez Middle school from January 2012 through October 2013. The school maintained an “A” during that time. My evaluations were highly effective.

I served as the principal at Sligh Middle School from July 2014 to July 2015. This was the first year of FSA (Florida Standards Assessment) which replaced the old state assessment FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test). The school grade went from an “F” to a “D” which exited the school from state oversight. My evaluation was effective. Despite the article you referenced where I was afforded an interview to share my perspective, the school improved, fell short of a “C” by five points and landed the “C” the following year. After that it returned to state oversight, has had two principals assigned and had a mass exodus of teachers since my departure.

In all of the assignments the schools where I served as principal received the schools recognition awards which resulted in all personnel receiving a monetary bonus from the state of Florida. This laments the fact that the schools improved under my leadership. Despite any narrative contrived, the state scores and school recognition programs denote improvement that cannot be disputed.

Mr. Gandolfo made a reference to my leadership style as “military style” in a derogatory description of me in reference to leading teachers. I served my country proudly as an infantry and later an intelligence officer in the US Army. I served in a combat zone in the Middle East during Operation Southern Watch. Those who serve should be appreciated and not disparaged for service. It’s a sacrifice that only .7 of the population makes.

My character and reputation has been recklessly used for entertainment and to sensationalize matters in order to increase readership. The tragedy is that our students have shown in all of these instances that they can be taught and provided a quality education despite the socio-economic conditions from which they come. Most of these assignments required me to hire scores of teachers. We never had a line waiting to be hired. So as a teacher recruiter, I have an abundance of experience staffing schools and have brought many teachers into the teaching ranks in Pinellas County Schools.

